



LEO J. SHAPIRO & ASSOCIATES LLC.

August 21, 2008

Screens

It is hard to imagine that a century ago Americans lived without screens. The only moving screens then were silent movies projected on an inert screen. Electronic screens first became popular with the introduction of television after World War II. For a long time, the television screen held sway, even as film technology advanced and big screen movie theaters spread across the country. What both television and movie screens had in common was that they served passive audiences who had chosen to watch a film or TV program. The earliest interactive screens emerged with calculators that performed computation and displayed the results on a screen. From that beginning, interactive screens emerged with the computer monitors in the 1970's and have been on a roll ever since. Now, interactive screens are surpassing television and even film in their claim on eyeballs and fingers.

A study just completed by Leo J. Shapiro & Associates, finds that 47% of adult Americans are watching less television than a year ago, and 21% more. Just the reverse is true of time being spent with computer screens; 49% say they are spending more time on computer screens than a year ago, and 22% less. These percentages are based on the 80% of Americans who report that they use a computer at home or at work and the nearly 100% of households who own a television.

American adults estimate that they spend, on average, 16 hours a week watching television. In 2002 – six years ago – an earlier Shapiro study found that television viewing was nearly 50% higher, averaging 23 hours a week.

All forms of interactive screens are claiming more time from consumers. Cell phones, now owned by more than eight in ten adults, are used on average seventeen times a day to make or receive calls, each call involving the use of the cell phone screen. Moreover, the cell phone screen serves an increasingly robust number of functions, including games, organizer, and connection to the Internet. The most intensely interactive screen – the video game – has continued to grow.

American adults are averaging 20 hours a week using computers. Although these hours exceed TV viewing, they reflect the fact that computers – and thereby moving screens – have become a major adjunct to the workplace. Two-thirds of the hours that American adults spend with computers are spent at work. Thus, current use of the computer unrelated to work averages seven hours a week, or nearly half of hours spent watching TV.

The explosion of programming choice on television has not halted the declining hours that television is being watched. Interactive relationships with screens are winning the day over passive use of screens. The introduction of interactivity to television screen viewing may well slow or even reverse the decline in television viewing. Such interaction already available to viewers includes blocking commercials, saving programs for later viewing, multiple-screen viewing, TV program listings and clips, and TV programs on demand. Choice between viewing content on television, online, or on cell phones may be working, as well, to restore the audience for “television” programs.

As television becomes more interactive, the movie theatre remains as the primary venue for viewing passive screens. In a heightened environment of interactivity, the appeal of watching a passive screen as part of a live audience may put the movie theater on a growth track. The success of simulcasting live performances in movie theaters such as the Metropolitan Opera and other entertainment events reflects what may now be a renewed demand for watching entertainment on passive screens as a member of an audience under one roof.

*For more information on studies underlying this report,
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